



Tip Sheets

Factors that Influence Behavior

As the practitioner observes and learns about a child, some of the factors that influence the child's behavior may be discovered. There are many factors that can affect a child's behavior or with which a child will find it difficult to cope. Some of these are external factors that are part of a child's environment, either at home or in the early childhood setting. Some are internal factors that might have a neurological base. Some factors can be controlled, reducing the tension for the child. Others are difficult or impossible to control. A child might need to be taught and re-taught to cope with the factors that are outside of her control (Poulsen, 1996).

External Factors that Might Influence a Child's Behavior

- An environment that is over stimulating
- Expectations that are too high or too low
- Feeling crowded
- Witnessing or being a victim of abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional)
- Neglect
- Activities that demand too little or too much
- Inconsistent expectations
- Loss of a loved one
- Addition of a sibling
- Arguments with a caregiver or between parents
- Infrequent opportunities to make choices

- Medication
- Being encouraged or rewarded for aggression
- Exposure to media violence
- Frequent changes in caregivers or routines
- Unmet emotional needs
- Poverty or worries about money
- Mental illness of parent or family member
- Substance abuse by family member

Internal Factors that Might Influence a Child's Behavior

- Temperament
- Illness
- Fatigue
- Hunger
- Poor nutrition
- Physical disabilities
- Neurological challenges
- Developmental lags
- Speech and language difficulties



Physical Environment

- The physical environment, or the way the space is arranged, has an important impact on children's behavior.
- Even subtle changes in the physical environment can have an impact on children's behavior. A good example is child-sized chairs in an early childhood setting.
- The physical environment could be defined as the area where children spend their time, both indoors and outdoors, the arrangement of the space, and how the space is cared for.
- Physical space layout can be determined by walking through the classroom setting or by drawing a simple diagram. For example, most children will break into a run if there is a long, narrow passageway ahead of them. The same is true for a classroom with open stretches of space. It is worthwhile to study the room floor plan from a child's viewpoint while walking through the classroom space.
- A change in the environment may help to reduce or eliminate a problem behavior.

Changes to the Environment

- Get rid of clutter. Simplify the layout of the room and materials. Add more activity choices. Offer relevant activity choices. This can decrease behaviors like wandering and an inability to choose activities.
- Make a place for everything. Use picture labels to show where things go. This can decrease behaviors like using materials roughly and resisting cleaning.
- Use shelves to define areas so children are not distracted by other activities. This can decrease behaviors like being easily distracted or trouble with staying on task.

Additional known and unknown factors might cause distress for a child. When a factor can be identified, it might be possible to eliminate or modify it, thereby, reducing the stress the child experiences.



For example, if a child is hungry when he arrives at child care, it may help him play more calmly and be ready to learn if he has breakfast or a snack. Sometimes, a program or practitioner will reject such a suggestion because they might feel breakfast is the parent's responsibility or that it would take too much work or require a change in schedule. However, each child's basic needs must be met before he can be expected to work and play alongside the other children in a cooperative manner. Practitioners need flexibility in their programs and a willingness to do whatever is needed to help a child perform at his best.

For more information on children's behavior, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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